



# HCFA FACT SHEET

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## MEDICARE'S HEALTHY AGING PROJECT

**Background:** *The Healthy Aging Project is Medicare's newest way of trying to help seniors stay healthy. Through this project the Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA), the federal Medicare agency, is using the best available science to identify what works to promote health and prevent disability in older Americans. Healthy Aging seeks new approaches in the way preventive care is provided to beneficiaries and makes beneficiaries more active partners in their own health maintenance.*

*Research by HCFA and other experts indicates that a major portion of the physical decline among the elderly is caused more by the lack of an effective personalized strategy for staying healthy than by the aging process itself. A growing body of medical literature indicates that chronic disease and functional disability can be measurably reduced or postponed through lifestyle changes, especially among seniors.*

*The reduction of health risk factors in the elderly should result in lower rates of disease and disability. This is particularly important now because the United States will have over 70 million seniors by the year 2030 -- more than double the 35 million today -- increasing the demand for health care.*

*Chronic disease is the leading cause of death, severe illness and disability in the United States, accounting for three out of four deaths. Eighty percent of the senior population have one or more chronic diseases, 50 percent have two or more chronic conditions, and 24 percent have severe chronic conditions that limit their ability to perform one or more activities of daily living.*

*But many chronic diseases can be prevented. The Healthy Aging Project is building a game plan for Medicare to help seniors stay healthy longer.*

### **Reducing Risk**

Many health promotion and disease prevention programs have been shown to reduce risk factors and lower health care costs, but these programs have never before been systematically studied and tested for effectiveness among people in Medicare. The Healthy Aging Project is the Health Care Financing Administration's first initiative to examine ways to reduce behavioral risk factors in the elderly, which contribute to 70 percent of the physical decline that occurs with aging. It will use the best available evidence to identify what works and then apply this information in practical ways to Medicare programs and policies.

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## **Using Scientific Evidence**

Medicare is using the Healthy Aging Project to identify and test interventions to reduce behavioral risk factors. Examples of interventions include: health risk appraisals combined with targeted interventions to reduce risk factors, arthritis self-management programs, smoking cessation strategies, physical activity and falls prevention programs.

## **Things That Work For Medicare Beneficiaries**

The Healthy Aging Project is examining whether certain health promotion interventions have a measurable impact on behavior change, health status, functional status, quality of life, use of services, consumer satisfaction, or cost of care. The project provides strategies that beneficiaries, health care professionals, peer review organizations and communities can use to promote health and delay disease in the older population. For example, the project is examining the most effective ways to help seniors quit smoking. The project also has identified ways to promote the use of Medicare preventive benefits such as flu shots.

## **First Steps**

Since the Healthy Aging Project was launched in 1998, HCFA has contracted for research on smoking cessation strategies, health risk appraisals, clinical preventive and screening services, chronic disease self management, and physical activity and falls prevention. One of the most significant early findings of the project is that changing health care delivery systems may be best way to ensure the delivery of preventive services that promote healthy aging. An example is the use of standing orders. Standing orders are instructions for a particular medical service, developed by physicians, and implemented on a continuing basis. Standing orders for flu and pneumonia immunizations, for example, allow non-physician health care personnel to give vaccinations, if the patient agrees, according to a pre-approved plan, without the need for the patient to be examined by a physician first. Scientific evidence shows that this use of standing orders is the most effective method of getting people to use important preventive health benefits, such as flu and pneumonia shots. Administering standing orders assures that in most cases a person will get needed shots automatically when making contact with a provider, such as a doctor's office, hospital or nursing home.

## **Working Together For Seniors**

The Healthy Aging Project was jointly developed by HCFA and the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, in consultation with the National Institute on Aging, the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, the Administration on Aging, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. HCFA is working with each of these agencies on different activities. For example, HCFA is working with the CDC on a pilot study to test the use of standing orders in nursing homes in several states. The Assistant Secretary on Aging has provided valuable input to the Healthy Aging Project. Together, HCFA and AoA are exploring comprehensive approaches to health promotion for seniors. The evidence-based approach of the Healthy Aging Project was modeled after AHRQ's evidence-based centers. In addition, the AHRQ's guidelines served as the foundation for HCFA's evidence report on smoking cessation and Medicare. The NIA is a regular participant on HCFA's evidence review panels and the two agencies have collaborated on several meetings related to senior health promotion.

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